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Americans Say National Party Conventions Still Important

Although the national party conventions themselves no longer have a deliberative role, most Americans continue to think that conventions play an important role in presidential campaigns. In the latest [Shorenstein Center](#) national poll, conducted during the week of the Democratic convention as part of the ongoing Vanishing Voter Project, 63 percent of the respondents agreed that “party conventions are still important because they give Americans an in-depth opportunity to know the candidates better,” as compared with 37 percent who agreed that “party conventions are now unimportant because the presidential nominees have been chosen months in advance through the primary elections.”

Party conventions do in fact contribute to Americans’ election interest and information. Forty-six percent of our respondents indicated they had had a conversation about the campaign within the past 24 hours, up from 28 percent in our mid-July poll. And of those who watched a segment of the Democratic convention, only 23 percent said they felt they had learned “not much at all” about John Kerry as a result. Forty percent claimed to have learned “a great deal” or “quite a bit.” Moreover, though Kerry did not get much of a bounce in the polls from the convention, he made the favorable impression required for him to maintain a strong position in the race. Seven times as many respondents said they thought “better” of Kerry from what they saw of the convention coverage as said they thought “worse” of him.

Despite the higher level of public interest in this year’s campaign, the 2004 Democratic convention audience was no larger than was the audience for the July convention four years ago. Thirty-seven percent of our respondents said they had watched some of the Democratic convention during the past 24 hours. Of these, about three in ten claimed to have watched for only a few minutes while four in ten claimed to have watched for an hour or more. These levels are nearly identical to those found in our national survey during the July national convention in 2000.

However, the viewing audience this time would have exceeded that of 2000 if the three major broadcast networks —ABC, CBS, and NBC— had not reduced their coverage. They each averaged 5 hours of coverage in 2000, but only 3 hours this year. As recently as 1992, the broadcast networks covered more than 10 hours of each convention.

According to our poll, about half of the convention audience on the typical night consisted of viewers who “just came across” the convention while watching TV and decided to watch part of it. The broadcast networks are the key to capturing a convention’s “inadvertent viewers.” For one thing, roughly a fifth of American homes don’t have cable. For another, many cable viewers habitually monitor the network channels and do not routinely monitor CNN, MSNBC, and Fox. Thus, when the convention is being televised on the broadcast networks, viewers are more likely to come across it and some will choose to watch it. More than three-fifths of all inadvertent viewers of the Democratic convention were drawn to it while watching a broadcast channel. Cable television, despite its more extensive coverage, pulled in less than two-fifths of such viewers.

Younger adults were particularly affected by the cutback in broadcast coverage. Among adults 30 years of age or younger, nearly two-thirds were inadvertent convention viewers, compared with less than half among older adults.

The results reported here are from nationwide telephone surveys of 1304 adults conducted July 27-30, 2004. The surveys have a sampling error of $\pm 4\%$. The [Vanishing Voter Project](#) is a study by the [Joan Shorenstein Center](#) on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at [Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government](#).